

Wine Tim White

The fret over BRETT

Brettanomyces has become a hot topic in Australian wine. While brett can be measured objectively in the lab, sensitivity to it varies considerably; what's more, some people enjoy the character.

The line between the subjective and objective in wine assessment can be a fine one. It's easy to say you like one wine and dislike another, but it gets harder when you have to say why.

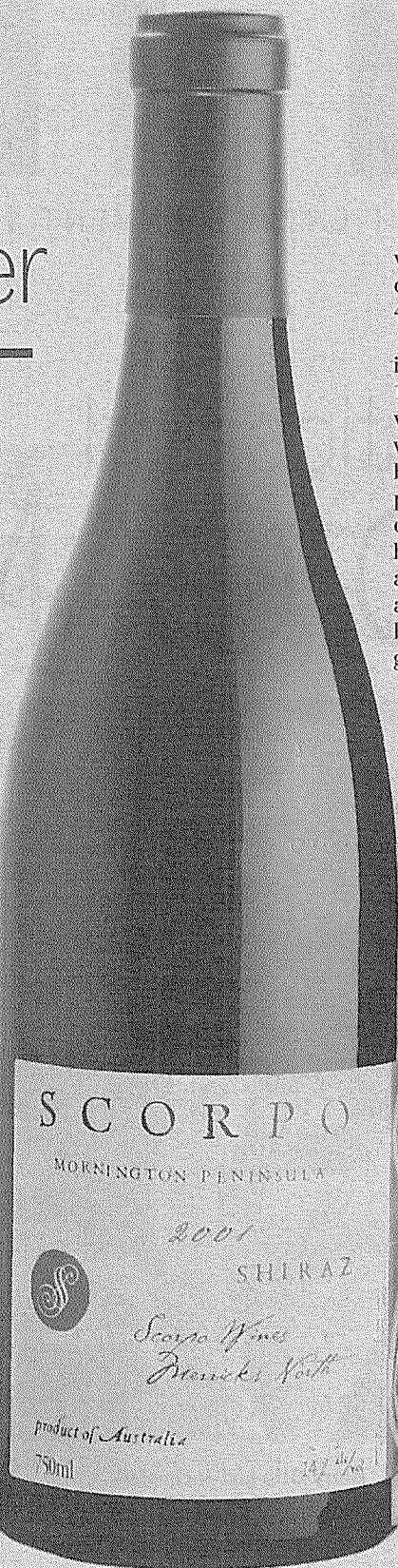
There are many components of a wine's make-up that can be perceived both sensorially, through tasting, and analytically, in the lab. If, for example, you feel a wine smells and tastes extremely vinegary, it's relatively easy to assess it for the levels of acetic acid (and other volatile acids) it contains.

The same applies for other perceived "undesirables" which might include excessive sulphur-related compounds or the dreaded 2,4,6-Trichloroanisole – a compound, often cork or cooperage derived, which can impart a distinct musty smell and taste to wine.

Another is brettanomyces (or its taxonomically correct name, Dekkera-Brettanomyces) – usually referred to as "brett" – which is commonly encountered in red wines. The two volatile compounds that invariably signal the presence of brettanomyces, namely 4-ethylphenol (4ep) and 4-ethylguaiacol (4eg), can be smelt, tasted and analysed in the laboratory.

It's fair to say brett has become a rather hot topic in Australian wine. I recently gave a highly favourable review to Scorpo's 2001 shiraz which has sparked some debate in the wine industry.

Like other wine yeasts, brettanomyces does convert sugar into alcohol, though very slowly, but in the process gives off distinctive odours and tastes variously described as horsey, barnyard-like, gamey, pharmaceutical. One of the worst side effects of brett in my view is the eviscerating effect it has on the texture – the mouth-feel – of a wine. "Bretty" wines with elevated



levels of 4ep can taste distinctly metallic or tinny.

Sensitivity to brettanomyces varies considerably and, to compound the issue, some people enjoy the character.

Irrespective of what my nose or palate tells me whenever I come across a bretty wine in my tastings, my first course of action is to discuss the issue with the winemaker and find out whether its presence is deliberate. The vast majority say they don't find it a desirable character and are seeking to eliminate it, if they haven't already done so.

So at what levels of 4ep and 4eg might a wine be considered bretty? The Australian Wine Research Institute's winemaker, Peter Godden, who's managing the organisation's wide-ranging brettanomyces project, says: "Chatonnet's [a leading Bordeaux oenologist] published threshold in Bordeaux red wine is 425 micrograms per litre – that's parts per billion – which he variously describes as elevated and negatively affecting wine quality. It is possible that in other wine styles it is lower than this. In numerous tastings we've undertaken with

very experienced wine judges, no one has been able to recognise 4ep at levels of 150 or less."

I listed the 2001 Scorpo Shiraz in my top 10 wines of the past 10 years just a few weeks ago. This was my tasting note: "This is where more than a few people will begin to question my sanity (and palate, no doubt). This is really one of the most exciting shiraz I've happened on recently. It's not big and thick, but fragrant, dusty, dry and spicy. Smells of raspberries, blackberries, black pepper, gunpowder, and mocha-scented oak. There's a waft or two of sulphide as well, but this blows off with air. In the mouth it's even more delicious: there's the raspberries and blackberries again, plenty of peppery spice, supple black plum fruit evolving across the palate, and long, dry, Tuscan-like tannins. Let's hope – for my sake – that this vineyard continues to deliver. Still available for just \$31!"

Wine writer Jeremy Oliver obviously doesn't share my view. He informed his "level four" website subscribers: "Last night I tasted another wine that would be exceptional were it not for a distinct influence from brettanomyces. It has tremendous depth of small red and black berry fruit, loads of smoky oak that it carries with ease, and some rustic sulphide-related complexity. But the horse-hair aromas and the metallic drying out from the back of the palate unquestionably stamp the Scorpo Shiraz 2001 (from the Mornington Peninsula) as another brett [sic]-influenced wine that is likely to become even more so with further time

in the bottle. The wine I've just mentioned, the 2001 Scorpo Shiraz, was recently subject to very generous national coverage by a wine writer loudly outspoken in his distaste for brett. A large number of wines displaying varying levels of this time-bomb-like flaw are presently being made, promoted, bought and cellared."

I rang the winemaker, Sandro Mosele of Kooyong on the Mornington Peninsula, whom I know to be fastidious in his approach to his craft. Mosele said he would forward five random samples to Vintessential Laboratories, one of the leading facilities of its type in Australia. One of the wines was "spiked" with 4ep for control purposes; the remaining four wines returned readings of (4ep/4eg) 90/10 (two bottles), 140/10, and 150/10. All below threshold levels of 4ep.

I contacted Vintessential's Marco Vallesi to ask him about the bottle variation and he told me: "This is a significant difference and highlights the fact that there is always some bottle variation. However, given five random samples have been analysed, the overall picture is that the wine has relatively low (below taste

threshold) levels of 4ep."

Independently, I forwarded a bottle of the Scorpo shiraz to the AWRI's Commercial Analytical Service. The results returned were 80/8.4 – again, way below accepted thresholds.

The 2001 Scorpo Shiraz was bottled in one run by Portavin, one of Australia's leading contract bottlers – and given no other bottle of the wine I've tasted, and there have been many, has shown brett characters, I have no hesitation whatsoever in continuing to passionately recommend this wine.

And while I don't believe that the 2001 Scorpo Shiraz is a

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seriously long-term cellaring proposition, I see no indicators that it will in any way deteriorate if cellared diligently.

Oliver concludes his article thus: "Tears before bedtime are simply inevitable." Well, there won't be any in my home. Unless they're those of Scorpo shiraz trickling down the inside of a wine glass. **I**

Stockists of the 2001 Scorpo Shiraz include Best Cellars, East Sydney (02 9361 3733); East End Cellars, Adelaide (08 8232 5300); and Randall the Wine Merchant, Albert Park, Victoria (03 9686 4122). Or call the winery on 03 9813 3312.

drinking it

Shingle Peak Sauvignon Blanc 2002 (Marlborough, NZ)

Crisp, lemon lime smells with some nectarine and hay. Clean, juicy and tingly smelling. Has zest and peel and crisp acidity; grassy, but not overwhelming. There's stone fruit, too, and tangy citrus peel to close. Juicy and mouth-watering. Excellent New Zealand wine. 90/100, \$24.

Mitchell Sevenhill Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon 1999 (Clare Valley, SA)

Violets, blackberries, blonde tobacco, fruit cake – smells very cabernet sauvignon and drags you in. In the mouth there's plenty of fruit-cake flavour, too, some smoky autumn leafiness, and firm, dry tannin. Moreish, savoury cabernet sauvignon and such a pleasant change from the sickly sweet oaky shiraz that abounds out there (at twice the price). 88/100, \$25.

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